



## Thailand

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The new Constitution, which became effective on August 24, 2007, provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, it restricted the activities of some groups. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report. The Government does not register new religious groups that have not been accepted into one of the existing religious governing bodies on doctrinal or other grounds. In practice, however, unregistered religious organizations operated freely, and the Government's practice of not recognizing new religious groups did not restrict their activities. The Government officially limits the number of foreign missionaries allowed to work in the country, although unregistered missionaries were present in large numbers and allowed to work freely.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In the southernmost border provinces, continued separatist violence contributed to tense relations between ethnic Thai Buddhist and ethnic Malay Muslim communities. While the conflict in the south primarily involves ethnicity and nationalism, the close affiliation between ethnic and religious identity in the country has caused it to take on religious overtones. As a result, there were a number of cases in which the violence in the region undermined citizens' abilities to undertake the full range of their religious activities.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 198,000 square miles and a population of 64 million. According to the 2000 census, approximately 94 percent of the population is Buddhist and 5 percent is Muslim; however, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), academics, and religious groups estimated that approximately 85 to 90 percent of the population is Theravada Buddhist and up to 10 percent of the population is Muslim. There are also small animist, Christian, Confucian, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh, and Taoist populations. According to the Religious Affairs Department (RAD), the numbers of persons who do not profess a religious faith make up less than one percent of the population.

Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion. The Buddhist clergy (Sangha), consists of two main schools: Mahanikaya and Dhammayuttika. The former is older and more prevalent within the monastic community than the latter, which grew out of a 19th-century reform movement led by King Mongkut (Rama IV). Both groups are governed by the same ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Islam is the dominant religion in four of the five southernmost provinces, which border Malaysia. The majority of Muslims are ethnic Malay, but the Muslim population also includes descendants of immigrants from South Asia, China, Cambodia, and Indonesia. The RAD reported that there are 3,610 registered mosques in 66 provinces, of which 2,312 are located in the five southernmost provinces. According to the RAD, 99 percent of these mosques are associated with the Sunni branch of Islam. Shi'a mosques make up the remaining 1 percent.

According to RAD statistics, there are an estimated 360,836 Christians in the country, constituting 0.5 percent of the population. While there are a number of denominations, the Government recognizes five Christian umbrella organizations: the Catholic Mission of Bangkok (Roman Catholic), the Church of Christ in Thailand (Protestant), the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (Protestant), Saha Christchak (Baptist), and the Seventh-day Adventists. The oldest of these groupings, the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT), was formed in 1934 and has 500 registered churches. The Catholic Mission of Bangkok presently has 250 to 300 registered churches. The Evangelical Foundation of Thailand has 750 registered churches but approximately the same number of followers as the CCT.

According to a 2002 Government survey, there are 9 recognized tribal groups (chao khao), comprised of approximately 920,000 persons. These groups generally practice syncretistic forms of Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism, and spirit worship.

The Sikh Council of Thailand estimates that there are 70,000 Sikhs, most of whom reside in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Nakhon Ratchasima, Pattaya, Samui Island, and Phuket. There are 18 Sikh temples in the country.

According to RAD statistics and local Hindu organizations, there are an estimated 95,000 Hindus in the country. There are six Hindu temples--five in Bangkok and one under construction in Phuket.

The majority of ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese practice Mahayana or Theravada Buddhism. There are more than 718 Chinese and Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist shrines and temples throughout the country. Included in this statistic are 19 Vietnamese temples, 17 Chinese temples, and 682 Chinese shrines that registered with the Ministry of Interior. Many ethnic Chinese, as well as members of the Mien hill tribe, practice forms of Taoism. Some ethnic Chinese also practice Christianity, mainly Protestantism.

## **Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**

### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The new Constitution, which became effective on August 24, 2007, provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The 2007 Constitution states that discrimination against a person on the grounds of "a difference in religious belief" shall not be permitted, and there was no significant pattern of religious discrimination by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There is no state religion; however, Theravada Buddhism receives significant government support, and the 2007 Constitution retains the previous requirement that the monarch be Buddhist.

The 2007 Constitution provides for, and citizens generally enjoyed, a large measure of freedom of speech; however, laws prohibiting speech likely to insult Buddhism remain in place. The 1962 Sangha Act specifically prohibits the defamation or insult of Buddhism and the Buddhist clergy. Violators of the law could face up to one year imprisonment or fines of up to \$645 (20,000 baht). The 1956 Penal Code, last amended in 1976, prohibits the insult or disturbance of religious places or services of all officially recognized religions. Penalties range from imprisonment of 1 to 7 years or a fine of \$64 to \$452 (2,000 to 14,000 baht).

During the reporting period, there were five officially recognized religious groups: Buddhists, Muslims, Brahmin-Hindus, Sikhs, and Catholics. The RAD, which is located in the Ministry of Culture, registers religious groups. Under the provisions of the Religious Organizations Act, the RAD recognizes a new religious group if a national census shows that it has at least 5,000 adherents, has a uniquely recognizable theology, and is not politically active. A religious organization must also be accepted into at least one of the five existing recognized religious groups before the RAD will grant registration. Generally, the Government required that new groups receive acceptance from existing groups with similar belief systems. Four Protestant groups are recognized as subgroups of the Catholics. Government registration confers some benefits, including access to state subsidies, tax-exempt status, and preferential allocation of resident visas for organization officials. However, since 1984 the Government has not recognized any new religious groups. In practice unregistered religious groups operated freely, and the Government's practice of not recognizing any new religious groups

did not restrict their activities.

The 2007 Constitution retains the past requirement that the Government "patronize and protect Buddhism and other religions." In accordance with this, the Government subsidizes activities of the three largest religious communities: Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians. The Government allocated approximately \$102 million (3.3 billion baht) during fiscal year 2007 to support the National Buddhism Bureau, which was established in 2002 as an independent state agency. The Bureau oversees the Buddhist clergy and approved the curricula of Buddhist teachings for all Buddhist temples of educational institutions. In addition, sponsors educational and public relations materials on Buddhism as it relates to daily life. For fiscal year 2007 the Government, through the RAD, budgeted \$1.5 million (49.1 million baht) for Islamic organizations and \$149,000 (4.8 million baht) for Christian, Brahman-Hindu, and Sikh organizations.

The budgets for Buddhist and Islamic organizations included funds to support Buddhist and Islamic institutes of higher education, fund religious education programs in public and private schools, provide daily allowances for monks and Muslim clerics who hold administrative and senior ecclesiastical posts, and subsidize travel and health care for monks and Muslim clerics. Also included is an annual budget for the renovation and repair of temples and mosques, the maintenance of historic Buddhist sites, and the daily upkeep of the central mosque in Pattani. Other registered religious groups can request government support for renovation and repair work but do not receive a regular budget to maintain religious buildings, nor do they receive government assistance to support their clergy. In 2008 the RAD budgeted approximately \$552,000 (17.8 million baht) for the restoration of religious buildings of religious groups, of which \$403,000 (13 million baht) was allotted for the Muslim community and \$149,000 (4.8 million baht) for the Christian, Brahmin-Hindu, and Sikh communities. The National Buddhism Bureau provided \$18 million (579 million baht) for the maintenance of Buddhist temples and institutions. Private donations to registered religious organizations are tax deductible.

Religious groups proselytized freely. Monks working as Buddhist missionaries (dhammaduta) have been active since the end of World War II, particularly in border areas among the country's tribal populations. According to the National Buddhism Bureau and the Sangha Council, as of December 2007 there were 5,816 dhammaduta working in the country. In addition, the Government sponsored the international travel of another 1,517 Buddhist monks sent by their temples to disseminate religious information. Muslim and Christian missionaries do not receive public funds or state subsidies. Islamic organizations reported having small numbers of citizens working as missionaries in the country and abroad. Christian organizations reported much larger numbers of missionaries operating in the country, both foreign and Thai.

The Government observes Maka Bucha Day (the full moon day of the third lunar month, typically in February), Visakha Bucha Day (the full moon day of the sixth lunar month, typically in May), Asalaha Bucha Day (the full moon day of the eighth lunar month, typically in July), and Buddhist Lent as national holidays.

Religious education is required in public schools at both the primary and secondary education levels. In 2003 the Ministry of Education formulated a course called "Social, Religion, and Culture Studies," which students in each grade study for 1 to 2 hours each week. The course contains information about all of the recognized religions in the country. Students who wish to pursue in-depth studies of a particular religion may study at the religious schools and can transfer credits to the public school. Individual schools, working in conjunction with their local administrative boards, are authorized to arrange additional religious studies courses. The Supreme Sangha Council and the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand have created special curriculums for Buddhist and Islamic studies.

There are a variety of Islamic education opportunities for children. Tadika is an after-school religious course for children in grades one through six, which often takes place in a mosque. The RAD is responsible for overseeing the program, except for in the five southern provinces of Songkhla, Satun, Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani, where the courses are supervised by the Ministry of Education. According to government statistics, as of May 2008 there were 1,989 registered Islamic Religious and Moral Education centers teaching Tadika in the 5 southern provinces, with 212,550 students and 7,612 teachers. In the remainder of the country, the RAD registered 727 centers, with 83,404 students and 2,009 teachers.

For secondary school children, the Ministry of Education allows two separate curriculums for private Islamic studies schools. The first curriculum teaches both Islamic religious courses and traditional state education

coursework. As of May 2008, 272 schools used this curriculum nationwide. The Government recognizes these private schools, and graduating students can continue to higher education within the country. The second type teaches only Islamic religious courses. As of May 2008 there were 256 schools nationwide, with 25,398 students and 1,524 teachers using this curriculum. The Government registers but does not certify these schools, and students from these schools cannot continue to any higher education within the country.

Traditional private Islamic day schools (pondoks), located primarily in the south, offer a third type of Islamic education. As of May 2008, according to the Government, there were 392 registered pondok schools, primarily in Songkhla, Satun, Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat provinces. Registered pondoks receive government funding based on the number of enrolled students. Because pondoks were not required to register until 2004, following a militant attack in which pondoks were thought to have played a role, the exact number of total pondoks remains unknown. Credible sources believed that there could be as many as 1,000.

A clause retained in the 2007 Constitution requires the Government to "promote good understanding and harmony among followers of all religions." In accordance with this, the Government actively sponsored interfaith dialogue through regular meetings and public education programs. The RAD is responsible for carrying out and overseeing many of these efforts. On August, 30, 2007, the RAD held its annual interfaith meeting for representatives and members of all registered religious groups. From May 6-8, 2008, the RAD organized another interfaith convention focused on religious youth and interfaith reconciliation in Chonburi Province, just outside of Bangkok, which had approximately 200 participants. The RAD has a religious interfaith subcommittee that is comprised of representatives from all religious groups in the country and RAD officials and convenes every 3 months. The RAD sponsored a radio and newsletter public relations campaign promoting interreligious understanding and harmony. In February 2007 the 17-member Subcommittee on Religious Relations, located within the Prime Minister's National Identity Promotion Office, reorganized to become the 29-member Subcommittee of Moral and Religious Promotion. The subcommittee coordinated and worked with religious organizations, community leaders, youth networks, and the Government on how these groups might better apply religious principles and practices into their organizations. The subcommittee is chaired by a retired army general and is composed of representatives from the Buddhist, Muslim, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, and Sikh communities in addition to civil servants from several government agencies.

### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

The Government does not recognize religious groups other than the five existing groupings; however, unregistered religious organizations operated freely.

The number of foreign missionaries registered with the Government is limited to a quota established by the RAD in 1982. The quota system is organized along both religious and denominational lines. There were close to 1,030 registered foreign missionaries in the country, mostly Christians. During the period covered by this report, the Government increased by one its quota for Sikh missionaries. In addition to these formal quotas, many unregistered missionaries were able to live and work in the country without government interference. While registration conferred some benefits, such as longer terms for visa stays, being unregistered was not a significant barrier to foreign missionary activity. Many foreign missionaries entered the country using tourist visas and proselytized without acknowledgment of the RAD. There were no reports that foreign missionaries were deported or harassed for working without registration.

Muslim professors and clerics, particularly in the far south, continue to face additional scrutiny because of continued government concern about the resurgence of Muslim separatist activities. While this usually did not appear to inhibit their religious activities, a number of Muslim teachers in three southern provinces were arrested for their alleged support for insurgent activity, and one Islamic school was closed after a raid uncovered bomb-making material and weapons.

Government regulations prohibit female civil servants from wearing headscarves when dressed in civil servant uniforms; however, in practice most female civil servants were permitted by their superiors to wear headscarves if they wished, particularly in the southernmost provinces. Muslim female civil servants not required to wear uniforms were allowed to wear headscarves.

### *Abuses of Religious Freedom*

*On April 9, 2007, in the Yala Province, four Muslim youths were killed while riding in a pickup truck by what the press reported were government-backed village defense volunteers, who tend to be Buddhists. No further information was available on the incident during the reporting period.*

On March 19, 2008, in the Southern Narathiwat Province, the 39th Special Taskforce Unit associated with Wat Suan Tham in Reuso district arrested Imam Yapa Kaseng, along with his son and four other villagers, while searching for suspected separatist rebels. Two days later the authorities informed his family that the imam had died while in custody. His relatives reported that his body showed signs of torture, including bruises, burn marks, and fractured ribs. The case remained under investigation by a special committee.

During the reporting period, there was an increase in arrests and detention of Chinese national Falun Gong members for distributing religious material or gathering near the Chinese Embassy. On March 13 and 14, 2008, four mainland Chinese members were arrested while distributing leaflets near the Chinese Embassy. All were to remain at the Bangkok Immigration Detention Center until a third country accepted them or until they agreed to return to China.

On February 8, 2008, 13 Chinese national Falun Gong members were arrested during a sit-in across from the Chinese Embassy and near the King's residence. Thai police reported that they were arrested for illegal entry. All 13 had registered as persons of concern with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and they remained in Bangkok's Immigration Detention Center at the end of the reporting period.

In 2007, 20 Falun Gong members were arrested in Bangkok, primarily for distributing leaflets to Chinese tourists, but all were released without charge or detention. Despite this, the group was able to print religious materials both in Thai and Chinese on a limited, informal basis for free distribution. The group also maintained a website that advertised daily gatherings in Bangkok.

#### *Forced Religious Conversion*

There were no reports of forced religious conversions, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

### **Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination**

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. The violence perpetrated by ethnic Malay Muslim Thais against ethnic Thai Buddhists caused tensions between religious groups to remain high and invited retaliatory killings and human rights abuses by both groups. While the conflict in the south is primarily about ethnicity and nationalism, the close affiliation between ethnic and religious identity in the country has caused it to take on religious overtones. As a result, there were a number of cases in which the violence in the region undermined citizens' abilities to undertake the full range of their religious activities.

*On May 28, 2008, in Yala Province, rebels attacked a Muslim wedding convoy, injuring ten people. Some villagers on their way to the ceremony were armed and fought back, killing one of the rebels.*

*On February 6, 2008, a bomb hidden in a motorcycle parked near a Chinese shrine in Southern Pattani Province, Sai Buri District, killed one soldier and injured six others.*

*On February 4, 2008, a bomb exploded as members of the Pattani Islamic Committee took part in a ceremony to release fish into an irrigation canal at an Islamic religious primary school. The explosion killed one person and injured ten others.*

On August 25, 2007, in Tambon Sabarang, Muang District, in Pattani Province, suspected militants detonated a 5-kilogram improvised explosive device (IED) in front of a grocery store. According to a credible NGO, two novice monks from Wat Lakmuang Temple, who were collecting their morning alms at the time of the bombing, were primary targets. Both of the monks were injured, together with six soldiers from Pattani Taskforce 23, who provided them protection. The store owner was killed instantly.

*During the reporting period, 11 out of 13 suspects were arrested and were in the process of being tried for the killing of a Buddhist monk and two novices in a 2005 attack on a Buddhist temple in Pattani Province. The Pattani Provincial Court sentenced five of the suspects to receive the death penalty and then reduced the sentence to life imprisonment after they pled guilty. The case against the other six suspects was dismissed.*

*On August 19, 2007, two men on a motorbike opened fire on a group of people in front of a mosque in Narathiwat Province.*

*At the end of the reporting period, no one had been arrested for the 2004 killing of three Buddhist monks and the beheading of one civilian Buddhist rubber tapper, or for the 2004 attacks on Buddhist temples and one Chinese shrine in the southern provinces of the country. The police reported that one attacker was identified in the killing of the monks in 2004 but later discovered he had died during the Tak Bai incident of October 2004. The Government continued to investigate these incidents in the context of security operations involving the ongoing separatist violence in the south.*

*Buddhist monks continued to report that they were fearful and thus no longer able to travel freely through southern communities to receive alms. They also claimed that laypersons sometimes declined to assist them in their daily activities out of fear of being targeted by militants. In response to the killings, the Government stationed troops to protect the religious practitioners and structures of all faiths in communities where the potential for violence existed and provided armed escort for Buddhist monks, where necessary, for their daily rounds to receive alms. However, government troops were often located within Buddhist temples, which was perceived by some NGOs and ethnic Malay Muslims as a militarization of Buddhist temples. Other NGOs viewed the military presence as a response to the prior attacks on Buddhist temples.*

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officers regularly visit Muslim and Buddhist religious leaders, academics, and elected officials as part of the Embassy's goal of understanding the complex ethnic and religious issues at play in society. In September 2007 the Embassy hosted a series of iftardinners for key Muslim leaders, students, and disadvantaged youth to demonstrate respect for, and an understanding of, Islamic traditions, and to share information about Muslim life in the United States and the importance of religious freedom.

During 2007 seven Muslims from a broad range of professions participated in the International Visitor Leadership Program, and six Muslims participated in the Voluntary Visitor Program. During their visits to the United States, they had the opportunity to observe individuals from all religious groups openly practice their faith freely and without conflict.

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